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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [IN CH](#)
SUBJECT: TIBET: SITUATION "FAR FROM NORMAL," BUT REPEAT OF
2008 WIDESPREAD UNREST "UNLIKELY," CONTACTS SAY

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[1](#)B. BEIJING 203

[1](#)C. BEIJING 400

[1](#)D. 08 BEIJING 975

[1](#)E. NEW DELHI 278

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) A repeat of the spring 2008 unrest in Tibetan areas of China is unlikely this year given the extremely tight security blanketing Lhasa and other Tibetan communities, according to several Beijing-based observers. Tensions in Tibetan areas, however, remain high as the 50th anniversary of the failed March 10, 1959 Tibetan uprising that resulted in the Dalai Lama's flight to India approaches. Police overzealousness may precipitate clashes, one contact warned. The ongoing "Strike Hard" campaign is reportedly adding to resentment as authorities search Tibetans' cell phones for "reactionary content." Contacts cited the new "Serf Emancipation Day" holiday, forced celebration of the Tibetan New Year, economic hardship, ethnic discrimination and continued restrictions on Tibetans' international travel as additional points of stress. Tibet scholars in China are laboring under conditions of declining academic freedom and a government "uninterested in new ideas," one Peking University academic lamented. The demotion of former United Front Work Department official Bi Hua has further chilled the atmosphere for scholars and officials focused on Tibet policy, the academic said. End Summary.

Ramping Up Propaganda

[1](#)2. (C) As March 10, the 50th anniversary of the launch of the failed 1959 Tibet uprising, approaches, a growing number of editorials in official PRC Chinese-language media are warning against "secessionist threats" and criticizing the "Dalai clique" (ref A). Internationally, Chinese authorities are portraying Tibet as quickly recovering from the unrest of spring 2008, while noting they are still vigilant against the possibility of new disturbances. In mid-February, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) officials hosted foreign journalists on a tightly controlled media tour of Lhasa, during which TAR People's Congress Vice Chairman Nyima Cering (Nyima Tsering) declared, "Everything is back on track. Religious events have remained normal," according to the Xinhua News Agency. Continuing the PRC's propaganda line on Tibet, Xinhua recently announced that a new documentary film, "Tibet: Past and Present" (xizang jinxi) would open nationwide in theaters February 17.

Authorities "Well Prepared" for March Anniversary

13. (C) A repeat of the March 2008 unrest in Tibetan areas was "unlikely," according to Ma Rong (strictly protect), a sociologist specializing in Tibet at Peking University and a regular advisor to the CCP United Front Work Department (UFWD). Ma told PolOff February 8 that, unlike last year (ref D), TAR authorities were now "well prepared" as the March 10 anniversary of the 1959 uprising approaches. Ma predicted there might be isolated protests lasting "five minutes, 20 minutes, or maybe two hours," but any demonstrations would be "quickly brought under control." Ma acknowledged, however, that PRC security preparations were themselves creating increased tensions in Tibetan areas. In a February 18 conversation with PolOff, Zhang Xiaoping, chief editor of the China Tibet Information Center (www.tibet.cn), a propaganda website operated by the UFWD, reiterated official talking points that unrest in Tibet was "incited" by "outside instigators." "There may be big or small protests, but it all depends on the Tibetan exiles," Zhang asserted. Nevertheless, Zhang added, "The Central Government has made preparations, as we learned the lessons from last year."

14. (C) Wang Lixiong (strictly protect), a dissident writer and vocal critic of China's Tibet policy, told PolOff February 12 that any demonstrations surrounding the March 10 anniversary would probably be in reaction to "overzealous policing." A likely scenario, Wang said, would be for jittery Public Security Bureau

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(PSB) or People's Armed Police (PAP) officers to misinterpret and break up a normal religious gathering, thus precipitating an angry reaction by Tibetans.

15. (C) An American scholar in Beijing with extensive contacts in the Tibetan community told PolOff February 11 that "many rumors" were swirling around Tibetan communities about possible demonstrations in March. The scholar would not rule out the possibility of a large protest in Lhasa, but he said the penalties for expressing dissent were so high that Tibetans would likely choose "passive" methods of marking the March 10 anniversary, such as surreptitiously posting anti-government signs and slogans.

Government "Creating Unrest"

16. (C) Tibetan poet and dissident blogger Woese (Wei Se), who is married to Wang Lixiong, told PolOff February 12 that many Tibetans believed that local officials and security forces would themselves purposely instigate "unrest" that they would then be able to "put down," thus impressing their superiors. In Tibetan regions of Qinghai Province, Woese said, stories were circulating of People's Armed Police officers secretly putting up pro-independence posters that they then "confiscate" and use to show higher-level officials their effectiveness in rooting out "separatism." Officials in Tibet, Wang Lixiong and Woese asserted, have exaggerated the "separatist threat" as a way of securing budget resources and drawing attention away from their own corruption.

17. (C) An ethnic Tibetan contact, a Lhasa native now working in Beijing as a freelance writer, told PolOff February 13 that she did not believe such theories about officials exaggerating problems to impress their superiors. Nevertheless, officials across Tibet, she said, were "under great pressure" to ensure no protests occurred. The contact's sister, who works

for the national security division of the Lhasa PSB, said PAP units brought in to quell the March 2008 riots have remained in Lhasa, which means any dissent this year would be quickly squelched. Regardless whether protests erupt, she said, Tibetans remained "angry and frustrated." Ethnic relations in Tibet were "very bad" (hen zao gao), and prejudice against Tibetans in mainstream Han society was still high, though she reported Tibetans were having an easier time traveling around China, including checking into hotel rooms, than they did during the Olympics.

"Strike Hard"...against Tibetan Pop Music

18. (C) Beijing-based contacts said the ongoing "Strike Hard" campaign in Tibetan areas (purportedly aimed at "fighting crime") was increasing tensions in Lhasa, particularly the intrusive searches of cell phones for "reactionary" material. In December, the Lhasa Public Security Bureau (PSB) announced that 69 people had been arrested since March 2008 for "spreading rumors." One U.S. director of an NGO active in Tibet commented to PolOff February 19 that Tibetans were being arrested for having certain "subversive" songs stored on cell phones and MP3 players. "Anything from India," she said, "regardless of whether it is political, is grounds for arrest." Woesser commented separately that the crackdown on Tibetan music was particularly egregious and misguided. Woesser felt the "Strike Hard" campaign was directly connected to preparations for the March 10 anniversary and had little to do with "fighting crime."

Serf Emancipation Day

19. (C) The January decision by the TAR People's Congress to create a new "Serf Emancipation Day" holiday on March 28 (the date the 1959 uprising was defeated, which official propaganda declares as the beginning of Tibet's "democratic reform" (ref B)) has angered Tibetan intellectuals, though ordinary Tibetans were largely shrugging it off as just another propaganda campaign, according to our contacts. The American scholar said "Serf Emancipation Day" was consistent with the CCP's long-term policy of "negating and denigrating Tibetan culture," and thus

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incensed many Tibetans. Much of the Party's criticism of Tibet's serf society was taken out of context, he said. For example, official propaganda often contained photos of "barbaric" musical instruments made from human bones, the scholar observed, yet made no mention of the spiritual significance of such objects or the fact that Tibetans willingly donated their bones for such purposes, much the way people today donated their bodies to science. The Tibetan freelance writer contact told PolOff she personally found the "Serf Emancipation" holiday offensive, but she believed most Tibetans were ignoring it, and this silence was itself "a kind of statement." Woesser said the new holiday was both "humiliating" (chi ru) and "farcical" (feng ci). Noting that wide segments of society participated in the March 2008 demonstrations, Woesser said, "If we were all emancipated, then why are we protesting?" Ma Rong, of Peking University, said the "Serf Emancipation Day" holiday was supported by most ethnic-Tibetan Party leaders, who he said were among the most "hard-line" and ardently opposed to the Dalai Lama's return.

"Celebrating" Losar, the Tibetan New Year

¶10. (C) The Tibetan Government-in-Exile recently announced that it would not organize celebrations for the February 25 Tibetan New Year, or Losar, given the tragic events of the past year. Woesser said the muted festivities were not the result of any organized "political protest" but rather reflected Tibetans' genuine feelings that there was little to celebrate. Nevertheless, authorities were providing fireworks to government work units, she said, and ordering Tibetan cadres to participate in Losar parties. Like other official media outlets, Zhang Xiaoping's China Tibet Information Center website contains stories of Tibetans "eagerly preparing" for the New Year. Zhang criticized the Dalai Lama for "politicizing" a "Tibetan tradition" like Losar. However, Zhang acknowledged that the Dalai Lama remained an authoritative figure in Tibetan society and as a result "celebrations this time may not be as grand (long zhong) as in the past."

The "Perpetually Broken Passport Machine"

¶11. (C) Tibetans are experiencing more difficulty than ever traveling abroad, according to Wang Lixiong, Woesser, and NGO contacts. Woesser noted her own difficulty in obtaining a passport (the PSB in Changchun, Jilin Province, where Woesser has legal residence, denied her 2007 application on "national security" grounds), but she said many "non-sensitive" Tibetans were also unable to secure travel documents. The American NGO contact separately voiced concern to PolOff, saying Tibetans in Lhasa frequently joked that "the passport machine has been broken for years." A U.S. NGO, in a February 14 e-mail to ConGen Chengdu, said authorities were harassing Tibetans seeking to travel to the United States, and that parents of Tibetans "pursuing overseas opportunities" were "threatened with loss of their jobs." Wang Lixiong and the American NGO contact both urged the USG to press China to abide by its own laws and not arbitrarily deny passports on the basis of ethnicity.

Economic Hardship, More Migrants

¶12. (C) Several contacts cited economic conditions as another stress on Tibetan society. Woesser said both the TAR and Central Governments had increased pay and benefits for government workers in Tibetan areas, but this had served to exacerbate the income gap between Tibetans "in the system" (i.e., with government jobs) and those "on the outside." Similarly, the ethnic Tibetan contact told PolOff her relatives with government positions (in addition to the sister in the PSB, this contact has a brother who works as a Lhasa middle school teacher) had seen their incomes "rise significantly" since the unrest in March 2008. Other relatives employed in the tourism industry, however, were facing "severe financial stress," she said. Woesser speculated that, with China's economy slowing, more Han and Hui migrants were likely to move to Tibet in 2009 in search of jobs, which would only further contribute to tensions there. Zhang Xiaoping told

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PolOff that the economic fallout of the March riots had made many Tibetans lose their enthusiasm for anti-government demonstrations. "Tibetans are suffering the consequences of the unrest," and are now less likely to join new protests, Zhang claimed.

Academic Freedom Decreasing for Tibet Experts

¶13. (C) Ma Rong told PolOff that academic freedom for

China-based Tibet experts, already poor to begin with, had deteriorated since last March. Ma said that since the Lhasa riots, Chinese "leaders" had warned him "not to be a spokesperson for the Dalai Lama," which Ma interpreted to mean that the Party was not interested in new proposals or forward-leaning research about Tibet policy. Ma lamented academics' lack of influence in China on Tibet policy, which he said was in contrast to economics, where scholars played a "major role."

¶14. (C) The American scholar contact agreed with Ma Rong's comments regarding academic freedom, adding that academic exchange between Chinese and Western Tibetologists was "another victim" of the 2008 Tibet unrest. Since the March riots, the American scholar said, Western Tibet experts as a group had become more sympathetic to the Dalai Lama. In this atmosphere, Chinese institutions were less willing to participate in conferences abroad. The scholar described a recent briefing he gave for Tibet experts at a minorities university in Gansu Province on the state of Tibetan studies at Western universities. The Gansu professors, the scholar said, were "amazed" at the advanced level of Tibet scholarship abroad, yet still believed that their colleagues in the West harbored a "hidden agenda."

Demotion of UFWD Official for Being "Too Soft"

¶15. (C) Ma Rong offered insights into the CCP's investigation of Bi Hua, a former Tibet scholar fired in November 2008 from the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD). Ma said the case had further chilled the atmosphere for scholars and officials engaged in Tibet-related work. Bi Hua, whom Ma Rong described as "a friend," was Vice Director General of the China Tibetology Research Center before moving to the United Front Work Department in summer 2008. Ma said Bi Hua, who is Han Chinese, maintained a "work diary" on her unsecured computer, which her superiors considered a security breach. Another factor behind her firing, however, was Bi Hua's reputation as a conduit for "outside recommendations" from the academic community, which had caused some Party officials to consider her soft. Ma Rong said he and Bi Hua had attended a 2006 conference associated with Harvard Law School Tibet scholar Lobsang Sangay, who is highly critical of China. Ma speculated that Bi Hua's attendance at such events had "complicated" her situation. Bi Hua was not facing jail time, Ma said, but she had been "demoted two ranks" in the Party and "would never work in the Tibet policy field again."

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